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Directorate of
Intelligence

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Latin America Review

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14 February 1983

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Articles have been coordinated as appropriate with other offices within CIA. Comments and queries regarding this publication may be directed to the Chief, Production Staff, Office of African and Latin American Analysis, telephone

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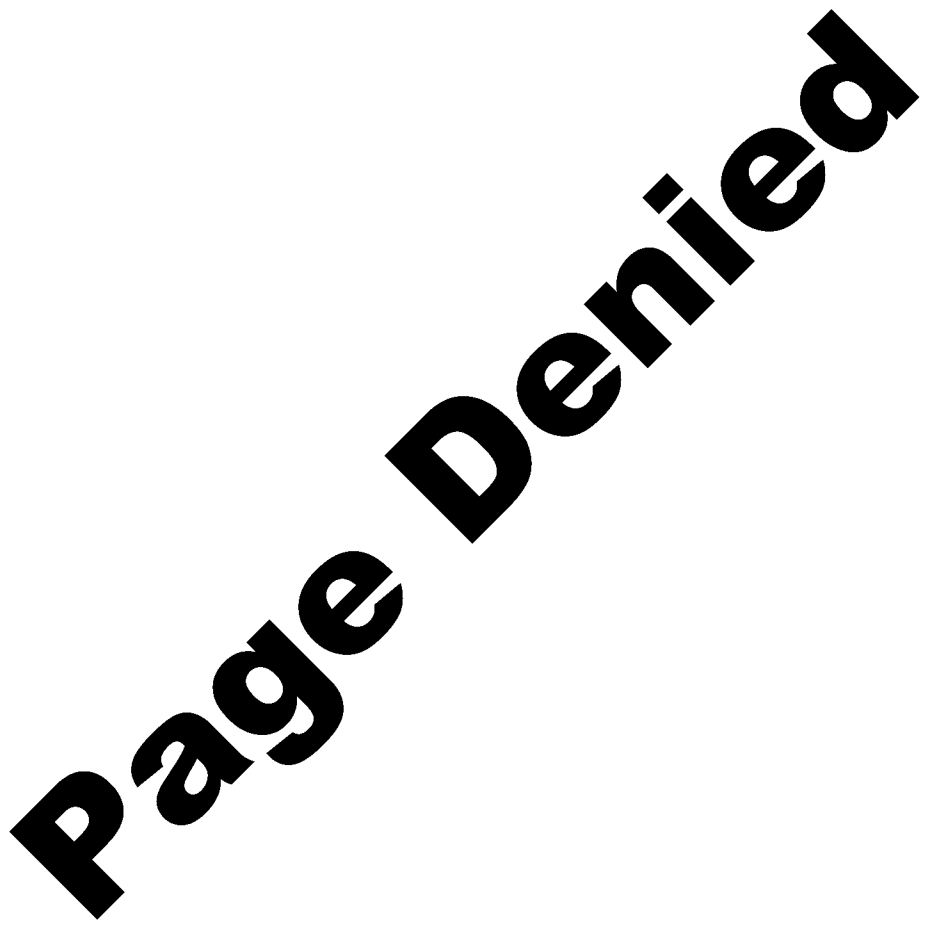

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Argentina: Church Takes Progressive Stand 3.5(c)

The Argentine Catholic Church is actively criticizing regime policies and has taken a firm stand in demanding a return to civilian rule--a course that could lead to a confrontation with the military if the proposed transition is aborted.

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Owing to the historical dominance of conservative priests, the Argentine Church has traditionally expressed less interest in political and social injustice than some of its counterparts elsewhere in Latin America. In September 1976, however, six months after the coup that unseated Isabel Peron, clergymen began showing more of a willingness to confront the government. Without repudiating the regime itself, they met privately with military leaders to condemn their handling of the war against subversion. As a result of continuing allegations of human rights violations, 67 of Argentina's 84 bishops signed a public document in 1977 protesting the government's repressive antiterrorist tactics.

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Progressives Bring Increased Political Awareness

With the death of more than a third of Argentina's bishops since 1977, younger and more liberal churchmen, influenced by progressive Church doctrine, have moved into positions of power. They have demonstrated a strong concern for social problems and according to press reports speak out frequently on political issues.

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The remaining conservatives still urge restraint, asserting that both the Church and the public would best be served if dissatisfaction with government policies were expressed privately. They are leery of activism because of their recollection of the Peronist ban on Church activities in the 1950s after the clergy confronted the regime directly.

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Increasingly, however, pronouncements by the clergy on current issues seem dominated by more liberal thinking. The escalation of civilian discontent in the wake of the Falklands debacle has been accompanied by broader and more vocal Church criticism of regime policies. Complaints have focused on conservative economic policies and the reluctance of the military to provide information on the persons who disappeared during the war against the terrorists, but have also included demands for a restoration of civil liberties and the release of political prisoners.

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In addition, the Church has strongly supported the transition to civilian rule, scheduled to take place in 1984. Since last August, the Argentine Council of Bishops has issued two forceful documents warning the military not to reverse the process. To facilitate a smooth change of power, the hierarchy agreed in November to act as mediator between the military and civilians after a stalemate in negotiations over the conditions and timing of the elections. Since then, a reconciliation commission of three bishops has been meeting with military and political leaders to work out a solution.

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The broad differences between the civilians and the military have given the Church a key position. It is acceptable to the government because, of all opposition groups, it is still the least critical of the armed forces. Civilian groups, for their part, probably count on Church progressives—who hold a majority on the commission—to influence the mediation in their favor.

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The Stakes

The Church and the politicians share similar views on a number of important issues. Recent meetings between the Argentine Episcopal Conference and political and labor leaders indicate that the Church is prepared to back civilian groups on matters ranging from an accounting of the disappeared persons and

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the release of all political prisoners to demands for higher wages and better social conditions for workers. Because the reconciliation commission will probably recommend a settlement favorable to the political parties, the Church could reap substantial gains if the transition does, in fact, lead to the election of a civilian government. On the other hand, the Church stands to lose if the proposed return to democracy fails because it will be left in the uncomfortable position of having to justify its support for civilian interests to a resurgent military.

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